

2023

Impact of COVID-19 on Service Dog Organizations

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Recommended Citation

Benbassat, Danny; Konopasky, Abigail; and Fox, Michael (2023) "Impact of COVID-19 on Service Dog Organizations," *People and Animals: The International Journal of Research and Practice*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1, Article 8.

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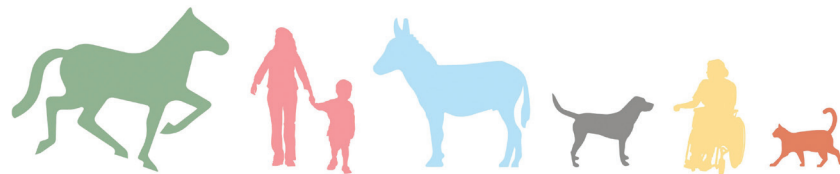
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Disclosure: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The authors further declare that the research, manuscript, or abstract have not been previously presented and that no funding was received.

Acknowledgments The authors of this study would like to express their sincere gratitude to the six service dog managers that made this study possible in the midst of the COVID pandemic.



Impact of COVID-19 on Service Dog Organizations

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Keywords: animal-assisted activities, COVID-19, crisis management, service dogs, workplace strategy

Abstract The 2019 coronavirus pandemic led to federal, state, and local measures that paralyzed businesses across the nation. Among them were behavioral and mental health nonprofit organizations. The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of the pandemic on nonprofit programs that train and place service dogs with veterans/service members. Six service dog managers completed eight reflection probe questionnaires and participated in three focus groups. This study found that facility shutdown, businesses shutdown, and social distancing resulted in a training bottleneck for both canines and humans. These primary challenges created secondary and tertiary challenges that mirror and lend support to themes found in other studies, namely funding, welfare, and space. In addition to these challenges, managers found opportunities in the face of adversity, namely partnerships, flexibility, and innovation. This study also adds 45 specific opportunities as a practical guide for animal-assisted activities managers. The authors hope that this guide will introduce innovative solutions to improve normal operations and help mitigate the consequences of future crises.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The virus primarily spread through small droplets emitted by coughing, sneezing, and talking. The World Health Organization designated COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. By June 2020, the virus had spread to 188 countries and resulted in almost 500,000 deaths around the world (World

Health Organization, n.d.). The first confirmed case in the United States was identified on January 21, 2020, and the first death was reported on February 29, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], January 2020; CDC, February 2020). On March 13, 2020, President Trump declared COVID-19 a national emergency and by March 17, 2020, the virus was present in all 50 states (National Public Radio, 2020). This resulted in governors issuing stay-at-home orders for their states.

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These orders created significant financial hardships and on February 28, 2020, the financial markets reported the largest single week decline since the 2008 financial crisis (Wall Street Journal, 2020). Businesses that were deemed nonessential by governors were ordered to shut down and others found it extremely difficult to operate under the new social distancing and personal protective equipment guidelines. Similar to prior crises, managers and staff experienced tremendous anxiety (Neely-Barnes et al., 2021). Unlike prior crises, the COVID-19 pandemic was not a single event, like Hurricane Katrina, but an ongoing crisis with an undetermined end date.

Neely-Barnes et al. (2021) interviewed 37 social services or behavioral health managers during the COVID pandemic. All agencies and organizations were from a single region in the southeastern United States. The goal was to identify challenges, but also opportunities for innovation and change. The authors found eight major themes that described the challenges and opportunities managers faced: funding, employees, space, supplies, policies/protocol, partnerships, mission, and innovation. Of these, funding and the welfare of employees (and clients) were noted as major challenges. On the other hand, developing partnerships and the use of innovation were noted as major opportunities to “lean into the crisis” (p. 303). The authors concluded by emphasizing the need to better prepare and train managers for crisis response.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on nonprofit programs that train and place service dogs with veterans/service members (henceforth referred to as “SM”).

Methods

Participants

Participation was solicited from service dog organizations that received the Wounded Warrior Service Dog Program (WWSDP) grant, a national grant program that helped match service dogs with SM. Of the 23 WWSDP recipients at the time of the study, 6 responded to the call for participation. From January 2019 to January 2020, one organization graduated 52 SM-dog teams, one graduated 18 teams, three graduated 7 teams, and one service dog organization graduated 5 SM-dog teams ($M = 16$, $Mdn = 7$, $SD = 18.24$). As shown in Table 1, the six organizations represented six states in the Eastern, Central, Mountain, and Pacific time zones. It also shows that the organizations represented a mix of breeding and nonbreeding, as well as kennel and nonkennel, operations.

The representatives of the six service dog organizations that participated in this study consisted of six managers (female = 4, male = 2; age: $M = 53$, $SD =$

Table 1. Participant Organizations by State, Canine Housing, and Source of Canines

	State	Kennel	Source	Stay-at-Home Order Date
Assistance Dogs of the West	NM	No	Bred	23 Mar 20
California Service Dog Academy	CA	Yes	Bred	17 Mar 20
Dog Tag Buddies	MT	No	Shelter	28 Mar 20
K9 Partners for Patriots	FL	No	Shelter	1 Apr 20
Patriot K9s of Wisconsin	WI	No	Shelter	25 Mar 20
Smoky Mountain Service Dogs	TN	Yes	Bred	2 Apr 20

Note. Kennel: yes = most canines are housed on site, no = most canines are not housed on site. Source: refers to primary source of canines

14.83). Two were chief executive officers (CEOs), one was a CEO advisor, one was a behavior and breeding director, one was a veteran liaison trainer, and one was a program manager. In addition to these roles, two participants were certified dog trainers. Service dog industry experience ranged from 5 to 29 years ($M = 9.17$, $Mdn = 5.5$, $SD = 9.80$).

The Uniformed Services University's Human Research Protections Program Office reviewed the research protocol and determined that it was exempt from a full Institutional Review Board (IRB) review. Nevertheless, consent forms outlining the procedures, risks, and benefits were read and signed by participants prior to participation. Participation was voluntary and not contingent upon present or future WWSDP grants.

Materials

Reflection Probe Questionnaire. This was the primary research tool to capture perceptions of challenges and opportunities. It was developed with

the input, and concurrence, of participants during an online synchronous session. The result of this cooperative session was a semistructured, open-ended questionnaire. The reflection probe questionnaire utilized a method known as ecological momentary assessment (EMA) (Shiffman et al., 2008) and required participants to focus on present thoughts and feelings, as opposed to past or future experiences. As shown in Table 2, the experiential parameters of interest were participant thoughts, actions, and feelings regarding the impact of COVID-19.

Focus Groups. This research tool was selected to elucidate the emergent themes from the reflection probe questionnaire and develop a final list of challenges and opportunities. A protocol was developed and disseminated to participants prior to the first session. It included ground rules and attributes of good probing questions based on work by Krueger (Krueger, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). This protocol was important because participants rotated as focus group moderators to promote authenticity,

Table 2. Reflection Probe Questionnaire

Impact of COVID-19 outbreak on wounded warrior service dog programs:

In-the-moment

Think about the impact of COVID-19 on your program; specifically, think about the memorable event(s) or moment(s) that most impacted the operation of your program today.

Briefly describe the event(s) or moment(s) and your reaction (what you did, think, or feel). Please provide details such as what and how.

By event(s) or moment(s) we mean anything that impacted the:

- Training of your dogs
- Training of your wounded warriors
- Your kennel operations
- The processing of new applications
- The demand for service dogs (increase/decrease)
- The demand for type of service dog (e.g., seeing eye, mobility, etc.)
- The demand for particular tasks to mitigate a disability (e.g., bracing)
- Barriers and facilitators for continuing work in general
- Morale
- Funding
- Communication

If nothing comes to mind, write "none."

credibility, and equal exchange of ideas (Krueger, 1997). Instead of recording the sessions, each moderator and the two researchers took careful notes and attempted to observe nonverbal data. This redundant note-based analysis was chosen to increase perceived rigor and reduce the risk of error, as well as to protect the integrity of the research process (Rutakumwa et al., 2020).

Design and Procedure

This study was conducted from May 2020 to August 2020. It was launched on May 7, 2020, 51 days after the COVID-19 national lockdown. The research team consisted of an experimental psychologist that managed the WWSDP, a researcher with dual doctorate degrees in educational psychology and linguistics, and a research assistant. A qualitative design was used to assess the impact of COVID-19 on service dog programs. This design utilized a participatory research method that transferred power from the researchers to the research participants (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). In other words, participants were free to articulate the topics that were important to them and their program. As shown in Figure 1, the design consisted of three phases: reflection probe questionnaire, thematic analysis, and focus group.

Reflection Probe Questionnaire. The questionnaire was sent to participants at least once a week in the months of May and June 2020 (May 8; May 14; May 20; May 26; June 2; June 8; June 12; June 25). It was sent using SurveyMonkey with all respondent information excluded. In addition, participants were instructed not to include any personal- or organizational-identifiable information. Thus, responses were anonymous and neither the participants nor the researchers knew who responded and how. In order to take full advantage of the EMA method, questionnaires were sent on random days. As a consequence, participants were asked to check their emails daily at 16:00 local time by using desktop or portable electronic devices. This time was selected, with participant concurrence, to permit reflection of the entire

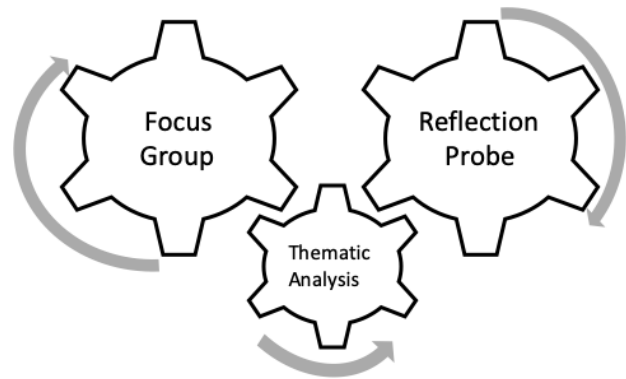


Figure 1. Multimethods design with unstructured probe and semistructured focus groups.

workday. This phase of the study produced robust and rich data, which was then distilled in the second phase.

Thematic Analysis. In the second phase, the reflection probe questionnaire data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This analysis utilized a six-step inductive approach first suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Table 3 lists the action and outcome of each step.

Focus Groups. In the third and final phase of the study, three Google Meet focus group sessions were conducted (August 4, August 13, August 18) to debate and adjudicate the emergent themes from the thematic analysis. The focus groups consisted of individual interviews, group interviews, and consensus votes.

Individual Interviews. The purpose of these sessions was to gain insights and perspectives from individual participants. A single participant was randomly chosen to act as a moderator and interview another single participant. The rest of the participants were present, but were muted. This practice supported the collection of rich data from individual participants. It also permitted participants to influence, and to be influenced by, other participants, consistent with the participatory research method chosen for this study. The moderator focused on one

Table 3. The Six Steps of the Thematic Analysis

Step	Action	Outcome
1	Reading and re-reading the narratives	Immersion in the data and shaping and reshaping of ideas
2	Searching for basic features	Extracting inclusive and exhaustive excerpts
3	Finding patterns or themes	Codes (meaningful categories)
4	Reviewing themes for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity	Realignment of codes that did not meaningfully cohere with each other
5	Defining the essence of each theme	Naming themes and identifying sub themes
6	Capturing vivid narrative extracts	Increasing authenticity

item from the thematic analysis, for example lack of canines, and used open-ended questions, such as, “Was lack of canines an issue for your organization?” Regardless of the answer, the moderator probed to understand obstacles or opportunities; for example, “Why was lack of canines an issue [or not an issue]?” or “What was, or is, your proposed solution to the lack of canines?” The moderator took detailed notes and was careful not to critique ideas or attempt to shift the narrative. When no new ideas emerged, despite probing questions, the moderator presented an oral summary and asked: “Is this an adequate summary?” If the participant answered in the affirmative, the moderator called on the next participant and repeated the process. It was acceptable for a participant to repeat or add to a previous answer. However, moderators encouraged participants to propose original ideas to mitigate the effects of conformity, groupthink, and social loafing (Asbury, 1995). After the last participant, the moderator consolidated notes, by combining common themes, and created a master list for the probed item. This process was repeated with a different moderator, and the next item from the thematic analysis, until all items were probed. The order in which participants were interviewed was counterbalanced to mitigate order effects.

Group Interviews. The purpose of these sessions was to gain insights and perspectives from the

group after each participant had the opportunity to opine and hear other perspectives. A single participant was randomly chosen to act as a moderator and facilitate a group discussion. The moderator focused on one master list from the individual interviews, for instance lack of canines, and asked: “Is this an adequate summary?” Participants were encouraged to brainstorm, debate, and present pro and con arguments until no new ideas emerged (Krueger & Casey, 2015). They were also requested not to take ownership over emergent topics and to participate in the discussion regardless of their questionnaire input. When discussing opportunities, the moderator stressed the use of actions that any organization, with average resources, may replicate. The moderator took careful notes and asked, “Is this an adequate summary? Have we missed anything?” The master list was revised as needed, and the process was repeated for the next probed item master list. Participants rotated as group moderators until all their probed item master lists had been discussed by the group.

Consensus Votes. The purpose of these sessions was to vote on keeping or eliminating each probed item. An item was eliminated if less than 75% of participants believed it was not important or practical. This criterion level was based on work by List (2001). Voting was completed anonymously using an online survey.

Results

In order to increase reader confidence in our data, methodology, and conclusions, we adopted the four trustworthiness criteria outlined by Connelly (2016). These criteria and procedures are outlined in Table 4.

Reflection Probe Questionnaire

The eight questionnaire submissions resulted in 42 responses (response rate = 87.5%) that ranged from 24 to 1,271 words ($M = 174.2$, $SD = 211.6$, $Mdn = 114$, mode = 28). There was a spike in narrative length on May 20, but it was due to one outlier (words = 1,271) response. There was no discernible relationship between word narrative length ($M = 827.7$, $SD = 650.8$, $Mdn = 645.5$, range = 376–2,355) and specific events across the eight probe dates. It should be noted that, at the time of the probes, Florida, Montana, New Mexico, Tennessee, and Wisconsin had partially lifted the stay-at-home orders for essential services, but service dog organizations were not deemed essential. Four participants responded with “none” (i.e., no response) on June 2 ($N = 1$), June 8 ($N = 1$), and June 12 ($N = 2$).

On June 25, it was determined that data saturation was reached and that no new patterns or information emerged from the questionnaires.

As shown in Table 5, the analysis of the 42 narratives suggested seven themes along three domains. In terms of frequency counts, the Operational domain was most frequently discussed, followed by the Management and Other domains. It should be noted that frequency counts, by themselves, may not be suggestive of group trends since data may have been posted by the same individual multiple times. While frequency may not always imply meaningfulness, we utilize frequency counts here to characterize and organize the results.

Operational Domain. This domain refers to matters or topics that directly involve daily work with canines and SM. The essence of this domain is nicely illustrated in the following quote: “Job descriptions changed overnight to ‘survival mode’ and caring for dogs in training.” This domain consisted of training ($N = 26$) and remote work ($N = 25$) themes.

Training. The essence of the training theme was day-to-day instruction and education of canines

Table 4. Trustworthiness Criteria and Procedures

Criteria	Procedure
Credibility	Braun & Clarke’s six-step inductive approach ¹ Participatory method Triangulation of data ² Iterative data gathering Prolonged engagement
Dependability (reliability)	Utilizing repeated probes over time ³
Transferability	Extensive use of quotes Representative sample of service dog organizations Research protocol transparency
Authenticity	Expert in semantic analysis WWSDP manager Managers from representative service dog organizations nationwide

¹Braun and Clarke (2006).

²Carter et al. (2014).

³Although it was not possible to assess individual stability over time due to anonymity, clusters of repeated patterns were identified until no new patterns emerged.

Table 5. Thematic Analysis

Domain	Theme	Subthemes	
Operational (<i>N</i> = 51)	Training (<i>N</i> = 26)	Shut down (<i>N</i> = 13) Restrictions (<i>N</i> = 9) Proficiency (<i>N</i> = 4)	
	Remote Work (<i>N</i> = 25)	Communication (<i>N</i> = 7) Feedback (<i>N</i> = 7) Online training (<i>N</i> = 6) Applications (<i>N</i> = 4) Counseling (<i>N</i> = 1)	
Management (<i>N</i> = 49)	Administrative (<i>N</i> = 32)	Applications (<i>N</i> = 12) Uncertainty (<i>N</i> = 8) Housing/Dog care (<i>N</i> = 3) Professional develop. (<i>N</i> = 3) Staff duties (<i>N</i> = 3) Volunteers/Staff (<i>N</i> = 3)	
		Financial (<i>N</i> = 12)	Fundraising/Grants (<i>N</i> = 7) Additional expenses (<i>N</i> = 3) VA benefits (<i>N</i> = 2)
		Canine Acquisition (<i>N</i> = 5)	Breeders (<i>N</i> = 2) Shelters (<i>N</i> = 2) Breeding (<i>N</i> = 1)
Other (<i>N</i> = 7)	Tasks (<i>N</i> = 4)	Balance (<i>N</i> = 2) Psychiatric (<i>N</i> = 2)	
	Screening (<i>N</i> = 3)	Matching (<i>N</i> = 2) Temperament testing (<i>N</i> = 1)	

and SM. The two most prevalent subthemes were shutting down ($N = 13$) and restrictions ($N = 9$). Most participants agreed that “the biggest impact to the program came by the Governor mandated shut down” and that “when the governor issued stay at home orders things got serious in our state very quickly.” Shutting down led to a “bottleneck of veterans in training and the need to postpone new classes.” The subtheme of restrictions referred to mandates imposed by federal and local health departments. Social distancing requirements and closure of retail stores forced the organization to move training to large public spaces ($N = 3$), limit classes to two learners ($N = 2$), postpone public access training ($N = 2$) and recertifications ($N = 1$), and use a speaker to communicate ($N = 1$). It should be noted that public access training was also impacted by the

lack of “exposure to . . . groups of other humans, canines, children, different environments and external stimuli.” Attempts to resume training were not always successful. In one case, a canine was separated from his SM after the SM refused “to participate in the process with his dog as a team.” This was “traumatizing for the veteran, but a necessity because we need to ensure the dog is properly trained.”

The third training subtheme addressed the proficiency ($N = 4$) of canines and SM. Few participants noted a regression ($N = 2$) in “loose leash walking,” “giving focus to the handlers,” and public access skills. In response, organizations sought to “increase the dogs training hours and get them back up to par for their age groups.” However, others noted that “veterans and their canines were not nearly as behind as we had anticipated” ($N = 2$).

Remote Work. The essence of the remote work theme was replacing on-site with remote activities. Some participants suggested that it was born out of necessity because they were “forced to seek other methods for teaching and providing support safely to our dog fosters and veterans.” The most prevalent subthemes were communication ($N = 7$), feedback ($N = 7$), and online training ($N = 6$). Organizations used social media ($N = 5$), emails ($N = 1$), and Mailchimp newsletter ($N = 1$) for routine communication with students. Zoom ($N = 1$), surveys ($N = 3$), and group chats ($N = 2$) were used to seek feedback about “comfort level to start training again via Zoom and POSSIBLY in person,” or “online continued ed training classes.” One organization also sought feedback from Google, Facebook, and Instagram Analytics to “adjust our usage, messaging and tonality, accordingly, maximizing news outreach.” For online training, organizations utilized training videos ($N = 2$), Facebook ($N = 2$), Google Classroom ($N = 1$), and online modules ($N = 1$) to instruct students.

Two additional remote work subthemes were applications ($N = 4$) and counseling ($N = 1$). Organizations used FaceTime to conduct home inspections ($N = 1$) and online forms to conduct “background checks . . . as per the guidelines in our online application form” ($N = 3$). Lastly, “Virtual counseling was also introduced by our staff counselor and is ongoing each week” ($N = 1$).

Management Domain. This domain refers to logistical, planning, or executive matters. These matters differ from everyday operational topics as illustrated nicely in the following quote: “In effect the concerns of all of our entire team is on the major 50,000 foot program topics, and not on any details like the need for a specific type of dog, etc.” This domain consisted of administrative ($N = 32$), financial ($N = 12$), and canine acquisition ($N = 5$) themes.

Administrative. The essence of the administrative theme is matters or topics related to the business of running a service dog organization. The most prevalent subthemes were SM applications ($N = 12$) and uncertainty ($N = 8$). While some organizations noted that “New applications remained the same in quantity”

($N = 3$), others noted an increase ($N = 2$) or decrease ($N = 2$). Regardless, time to process applications increased since “veterans at times have had difficulty getting some of their required paperwork due to closures of physician’s offices etc.” ($N = 3$). In one case, the delay in processing was also compounded by “not conducting any in person home visits” ($N = 1$). The combined effect was a growing waitlist of applicants ($N = 1$).

The subtheme of uncertainty is nicely explained by the following quote: “Just like day 1, I feel like I am still flying by the seat of my pants during this pandemic.” Contributing factors were lack of guidance “where there is nothing ‘for sure’ nor to model after” ($N = 3$), not knowing if “classes [will] be able to exist in the future?” ($N = 3$), and concerns about exposure and “uncertainty of zoonosis transmission between human and K9” ($N = 2$). This uncertainty led to a sense of mayhem or “running in circles,” “confusion,” and “frenzy.”

Four additional administrative subthemes were housing/dog care ($N = 3$), professional development ($N = 3$), staff duties ($N = 3$), and volunteers/staff ($N = 3$). The stay-at-home orders and the closure of kennel services pressured organizations that house canines on-site “to try and find short and long term foster homes/puppy raising homes for as many dogs in training as possible” ($N = 1$). It was explained that this solution “maximize[s] the benefits living in a home has for dogs in training,” provides companionship to SM “during a stressful time,” and “minimize[s] the need for us to provide daily care” and accommodations to canines. Some placed “dogs in training with Veterans who are waitlisted and agree to foster to adopt once they complete certain requirements” ($N = 2$). At the same time, the stay-at-home orders and reduction in training workload gave some administrators an opportunity to shift their focus to professional development activities such as training staff about COVID-19 ($N = 1$), meeting with “staff therapist to go over our response and any other COVID-19 concerns relating to the Veterans” ($N = 1$), and working toward Assistance Dogs International accreditation ($N = 1$). Lastly, the stay-at-home orders, travel restrictions, and suspected cases of infection resulted in a “major shift in staff job descriptions from

administrative to more all hands on deck caring for dogs on a daily basis" ($N = 3$) to compensate for lack of volunteers and staff ($N = 3$). In one case, the shortage resulted in a refusal of "an offer to accept some puppies because we did not have new puppy raiser homes immediately available."

Financial. The essence of the financial theme is funds to support management, operations, SM, canines, and staff. The most prevalent subtheme was lack of funding opportunities ($N = 7$). Participants noted that "funding is going to be a huge challenge with Covid-19 [*sic*]." Funding contributions were completely eliminated or substantially restricted ($N = 6$) and, with the stay-at-home orders and economic hardship, "regional philanthropic foundations have scaled back their funding options thanks to the hit in stocks and instability in the economy, etc." ($N = 1$). Two other financial subthemes were additional expenses ($N = 3$) and Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits ($N = 2$). In response to health department guidelines, organizations needed to "procure impossible to find supplies for students & staff" and pay "large sums of money for such items" as "Foot pedal garbage cans, [and] sanitation signs." In addition, the shortage in volunteers and staff resulted in "overtime for remaining staff" ($N = 1$). Lastly, participants noted that support from the VA to veterans with a "fixed income" that may not be able to "afford advanced medical care or a prescription food" for their service dog lacked "continuity" from "one VA facility to another." It was also noted that the VA lacked a "uniform application process [for service dog benefits] and appropriately trained employees to process them promptly."

Canine Acquisition. The essence of the canine acquisition theme is methods to obtain canine candidates for service dog training. The prevailing sentiment was that "it has become impossible now to find them for applicants due to restrictions and lack of canines." It was explained that "reputable breeders have slowed/stopped breeding based on low demand ($N = 2$) . . . and shelters are bare" ($N = 2$). In response, a breeder was "forced to double breed. . . . Even though increasing the number of dogs at once will be strenuous on our trainers, we have little choice to meet demand" ($N = 1$).

Other Domain. This domain refers to matters or topics that did not cohere with the Management or Operational domains. It included two subthemes; canine tasks ($N = 4$) and screening ($N = 3$).

Canine Tasks. The essence of the canine tasks subtheme was the type of work or service the dog was trained to perform. Some reported an increase in request for balance work ($N = 2$), while others reported an increased need for psychiatric service dogs ($N = 2$). It was noted that training service dogs to mitigate "vertigo, dizziness, and physical stability" may not always be wise since "it puts both dog and person at risk of severe injury." The reason for the increase in balance work was not clear, but one participant asked if the requirement to wear a mask resulted in increased respiration that exacerbated balance topics.

Screening. The essence of the screening subtheme was testing the suitability of canines and SM. Attempts to match a canine to a SM were complicated due to "social distancing guidelines and wearing PPE [personal protective equipment]" ($N = 2$). It was explained that "it is hard to maintain social distancing of 6 feet when leading a Dog up to a Veteran to determine the Dogs reactions." One organization introduced an applicant to a canine "using a 20' long line so we could observe their interaction from a safe distance." Prior to matching and training, canines must undergo temperament testing for suitability to become service dogs. With the stay-at-home orders, temperament testing was put "on hold" ($N = 1$). Some proposed "working with prison and rescue dogs" as a source for well-vetted canines.

Focus Groups

Data was collected on August 4, August 13, and August 18 with 100% participation rates. As noted, the focus group used the consensus group technique. Hence a synthetic, as opposed to analytic, data approach was used to summarize the data. This method was specifically designed for participative research with relatively untrained moderators (List, 2001). Results in this section represent a list of action statements that most (at least 75%) participants

agreed with. They are presented in a bulleted format to serve as a practical guide for service dog, and other animal-assisted activities, organizations.

Operational Domain. This section presents group consensus opportunities for the training and remote work subthemes.

Training. This synthesis presents a master list of actions that promote uninterrupted training despite local, state, and federal restrictions.

- Form associations with other dog organizations to sensitize canines to other canines.
- Hold social hours with other veterans, community members, and other canines.
- Replicate scenarios and environments with crude to exact models (e.g., restaurant, airplane). Note: Replicas are fine but consider the issue of traffic volume.
- Replicate sights and sounds using recordings, objects, or actors.
- Seek public outdoor areas with diverse sounds and stimuli (bus station, fire department, airport, hospital, tractor supply—general farm feed store, rural environment for farm animals, city hall with acoustic sound). In one case, a large protest was used as a training scenario.
- Transition from “training to graduate” to “training to maintain engagement.” The goal is not to end training but to heal veterans through a lifelong transformational treatment program (requires a paradigm shift that views being in a “perpetual training mode” as an advantage, not a disadvantage).
- Use videos to familiarize and teach veterans with public access skills.
- Use volunteers that have been previously screened for COVID-19 symptoms for public access training.
- Work with dogs off leash, when possible, to maintain social distancing.

Remote Work. This synthesis presents a master list of opportunities that promote effective remote work.

- Consider compatibility topics when using online learning tools (may use online course platforms like teachable.com).
- Consider limitations such as restricted internet or phone signal coverage.
- Tailor remote learning and communication plans to veteran preferences, strengths, and limitations (e.g., older veterans may prefer written, as opposed to electronic, materials).
- Recognize that COVID-19 may reinforce post-traumatic stress disorder tendencies for social isolation and find multimedia alternatives to socially engage veterans (e.g., videos of group sessions, public access training, etc.).
- Use individual/small group outings when possible.
- Use remote learning platforms (e.g., Zoom, videos, conference calls).
- Use simplest solutions (e.g., phone, as opposed to video or teleconference) to achieve learning goal(s).
- Use “sponsors” (e.g., family members, friends, neighbors) that work with the treatment/training team to share information and keep veterans engaged. This may be a viable solution for veterans that disengage and fail to respond to remote learning or communication attempts.

Management Domain. This section presents group consensus opportunities for the administrative, financial, and canine acquisition subthemes.

Administrative. This synthesis presents a master list of opportunities that promote effective executive decision-making. Note: Lack of staff/volunteers and housing of canines were not as important in retrospect. These topics reflected concerns in the early days of the pandemic.

- Assemble a collaborative “task force” open to all staff members and veterans to:
 - Empower employees and veterans to share concerns and come up with solutions.
 - Increase perceived sense of control.
 - Increase morale and camaraderie.

- Be transparent with staff and veterans by communicating accurately and frequently.
- Generate emergency response plans for similar and other public emergencies (e.g., active shooter, funding protocols, natural disasters, priorities, safety protocols, etc.).
- Learn about challenges and opportunities from all available sources, internal and external (i.e., use resource management), including local, state, and federal health organizations (e.g., clinics, hospitals, HHS) and health professionals and therapists.
- Have a backup plan to house canines. Some options include:
 - Puppy raisers and foster homes.
 - Work with local Bureau of Prisons (Prison Puppy Program).
 - Consider placing canines with waitlist veterans.
 - Work with residential treatment and educational centers for youth (e.g., boys' and girls' ranch).
- Take advantage of federal assistance programs (e.g., furloughs).

Financial. This synthesis presents a master list of opportunities that promote financial health in times of uncertainty.

- Explore estate planning opportunities.
- Explore for-profit revenue (selling dogs, training for general public).
- Explore government loan forgiveness programs (e.g., Paycheck Protection Program [PPP]).
- Find long-term corporate sponsorship.
- Increase social media marketing (e.g., Amazon smile, YouTube monetized channels).
- Increase online fundraising (as permitted by law).
- Increase outdoor fundraising activities.
- Save costs by exploring alternatives to in-house housing and care of canines (e.g., Prison Puppy Program).

Canine Acquisition. This synthesis presents a master list of opportunities to help service dog

organizations acquire service dogs. Note: This is an ongoing issue for some organizations regardless of COVID-19.

- Consider an on-point breeding program.
- Network with other service dog, working dog, military/police K9, breeder, rescue group, and academic puppy raising programs. Be sure to explain screening requirements to programs in advance to save time.
- See kennel clubs for recommended breeders that may be solicited.
- Seek cooperative breeding programs with membership (e.g., ADI North America Breeding Cooperative).
- Seek owners' surrender.
- Solicit on social media and marketing platforms (e.g., Craigslist).
- Work with Hero Labradors, an organization that breeds and delivers puppies for service dog organizations serving veterans.
- Work with national breeding programs (e.g., Dr. Cynthia Otto from Penn Vet Working Dog Center). Note: This program was pending at the time of this publication.
- Work with Project 2 Heal (Project to Heal Foundation). Note: May require logistic preparation since canines come in as puppies (e.g., find puppy raisers; see Administrative subtheme).

Other Domain. No new ideas emerged for this domain above and beyond the ones raised in the probe analysis.

Discussion

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governors implemented a series of actions to directly impede or prevent the spread of the virus. These actions resulted in three primary challenges to the operation, management, and training of service dog organizations: shutting down of service dog facilities, shutting down of businesses, and implementation of social

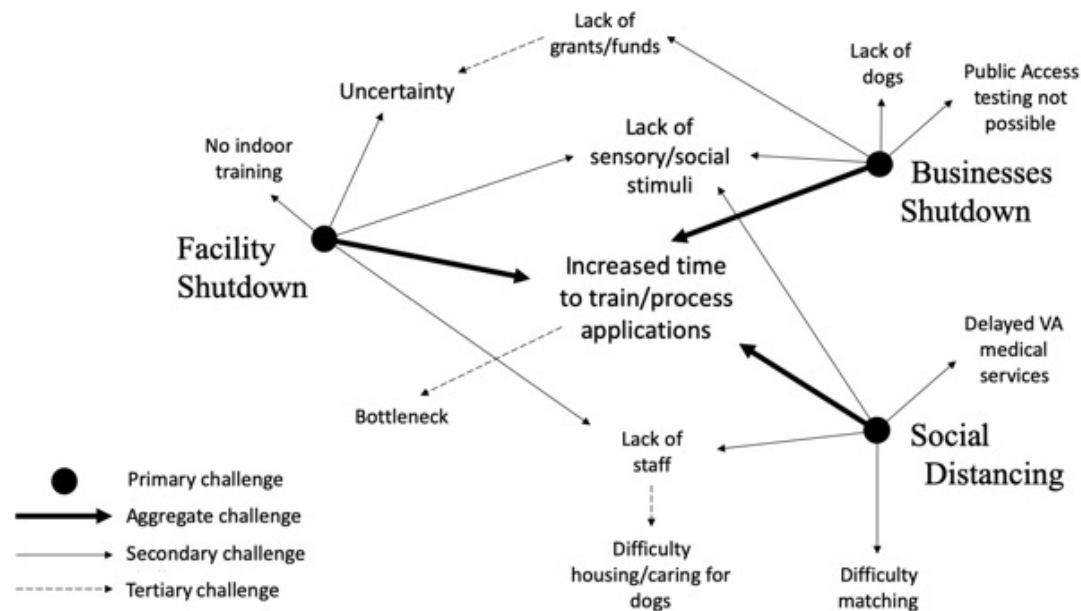


Figure 2. Thematic map.

distancing requirements. As shown in Figure 2, these primary challenges created secondary challenges, which, in turn, sometimes created tertiary challenges.

The combined effect of each primary and associated challenges resulted in the aggregate challenge of increased training and processing times. This increase led to a bottleneck of waitlist applicants. As shown in Figure 2, some primary challenges shared secondary challenges. For example, facility shutdown, businesses shutdown, and social distancing led to lack of “exposure to . . . groups of other humans, canines, children, different environments and external stimuli” (lack of sensory/social stimuli). Also, facility shutdown and social distancing led to a “shortage in volunteers and staff” (lack of staff) that impacted adequate boarding facility maintenance and canine care (difficulty housing/caring for dogs).

Despite these challenges, many managers found previously unknown, or unrecognized, opportunities such as using “online course more in the future as we monitor the progress of teams who got more online training than hands on training.” In the Results section, under Focus Group, this paper presents 45 specific opportunities to help animal-assisted activities

managers identify alternative, more efficient, ways of operating even as organizations return to business as usual.

It should be noted that change may come at a cost. Remote work, for example, may impede personalized training of “small nuances that help the vet/canine team succeed” and social support (“camaraderie, friendships, support, b.s. sessions, and a place where people like them, want to be around and with them”). One entry noted that a virtual interview and home inspection resulted in a SM experiencing “some dizziness from trying to walk with his phone through his residence.” Another noted that “our student base frequently stresses that they are extremely unsettled training via video and need to be back in the classroom.” Lastly, remote work may have placed a burden on management. For example, developing online courses, “visual aids to compliment [*sic*] the curriculum,” and finding “a user friendly platform to host and publish the courses” was “difficult” and “time consuming.” These efforts resulted in “added annual expense to the program.”

Nevertheless, the benefits of remote work, once realized, may outweigh the costs. One participant that articulated some concerns concluded by saying,

“However, today as I was distributing the links, I found myself feeling excited and proud to be able to offer this alternative method of learning and I am now looking forward to being creative as I will be adding additional learning opportunities that will likely benefit the clients and the volunteers for years to come.”

As noted in the Results section, a major limitation in this study was the attempt to determine the weight of each probe topic. For example, new applications either remained the same ($N = 3$), increased ($N = 2$), or decreased ($N = 2$). The astute reader will note that the total frequency count ($N = 7$) exceeded the total number of participants ($N = 6$). The use of anonymous data made it impossible to know if one participant reflected on this topic twice or if all seven reflections were made by the same participant. Nevertheless, in qualitative research, even a single data point may represent an extremely important topic.

Summary for Practitioners

This paper found that facility shutdown, businesses shutdown, and social distancing resulted in a training bottleneck for both canines and humans. These primary challenges created secondary and tertiary challenges. The main themes of these challenges mirror those identified by Neely-Barnes et al. (2021). First, managers found the lack of funding and financial uncertainty a major source of distress. In addition, managers were required to invest in new PPE, cleaning supplies, signage, and protective barriers, as well as in virtual environment technological equipment. One manager in this study stated that “now new responsibilities would be forthcoming for implementing PPE and more sanitization activities.” Second, managers were concerned about the welfare of employees and SM. One manager in this study noted, “Instinct told me we needed to take care of the students and canines first and personally, my employees and volunteers.” Another “was concerned for my employees. A few had spouses that were laid off or lost their jobs all together [*sic*].” Third, physical space was a challenge due to stay-at-home mandates,

closure of businesses such as shopping malls and stores, and social distancing requirements. This led to delays in critical phases of training such as public access training.

This paper also mirrors important opportunities identified by Neely-Barnes et al. (2021) and other authors (Grizzle et al., 2020; Smith, 2012). First, managers noted the importance of developing and strengthening partnerships to address needs and find funding opportunities. For example, one manager increased “‘outreach’ efforts in the private sector to pursue any By-Product opportunity for Grant, Foundation, or individual donor funding.” Another was developing a “new program working with prison and rescue dogs as a source of well vetted canines prior to our acceptance in to our program.” Second, managers needed to be nimble in the face of changing health and safety protocols and client needs. One manager in this study noted “an immediate change of duties for current staff. Job descriptions changed overnight to ‘survival mode’ and caring for dogs in training.” Another noted a “major shift in staff job descriptions.” This flexibility also extended to identifying new funding opportunities. For example, this paper and Neely-Barnes et al. (2021) both recognized the importance of the Paycheck Protection Program. Lastly, both this paper and Neely-Barnes et al. (2021) noted that the crisis created innovative opportunities that were previously unknown or unrecognized. Some examples from this study included placing puppies with waitlist SM and implementing a new online handler course. One manager noted, “I found myself feeling excited and proud to be able to offer this alternative method of learning and I am now looking forward to being creative.”

Arguably, the most important implication of this study is to help managers prepare and respond to a future crisis. The lack of manager crisis preparedness is a consistent theme in prior research (Neely-Barnes et al., 2021; Peters, 2017; Rolands, 2013; Tan, 2013). This theme was also echoed in this study. Managers felt they were “flying by the seat of my pants,” “running in circles,” and falling into “confusion/frenzy.” In addition to the general challenges and opportunities articulated above, this study adds 45 specific

opportunities. These opportunities are presented in a user-friendly format to serve as a practical guide for managers. They are especially informative to managers of animal-assisted activities organizations that work with emotional support, therapy, service, and facility animals. It is hoped that this guide will introduce innovative solutions and help mitigate the consequences of future crises.

Disclaimer: The opinions and assertions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Uniformed Services University or the Department of Defense.

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The authors further declare that the research, manuscript, or abstract have not been previously presented and that no funding was received.

Acknowledgments

The authors of this study would like to express their sincere gratitude to the six service dog managers that made this study possible in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

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