Psychiatric Service Dogs: Use and Value for Military Veterans With PTSD

Student researcher: Catherine Ephlin, Senior

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental condition that can occur after experiencing a traumatic event, such as military combat, and affects 23% of post-9/11 veterans. One emerging complementary treatment option for this population is PTSD service dogs, which have been shown to reduce PTSD symptoms and improve the psychosocial wellbeing of veterans. However, it is unknown how PTSD service dogs are helping symptoms and what PTSD symptoms may be helped the most by their assistance. The objective of this research was to determine which PTSD symptoms are helped the most by service dogs and which tasks were the most effective at helping treat PTSD symptoms.

A total of 121 post-9/11 military veterans with PTSD, recruited through K9s For Warriors, participated in a 10- to 15-minute-long online survey. Results found that the PTSD symptom helped the most by service dogs was being “super alert” or always feeling on guard. As PTSD service dogs are trained to instill a sense of safety and calmness in the veteran, it is logical that hypervigilance symptoms may be helped the most. In addition, veterans reported that the most helpful trained task that PTSD service dogs performed was calming/comforting anxiety, helping an average of 11.78 out of 20 PTSD symptoms. This study is important because the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will not fund service dogs as a treatment for PTSD because there are limited evidence-based studies demonstrating their effect. Research like this is critical for veterans that could benefit from this alternative treatment.

Research advisor Kerri Rodriguez writes: “Although PTSD service dogs are becoming increasingly popular among military veterans, there is a lack of research on their efficacy and value. Catherine’s project investigates the therapeutic value of these service dogs for specific PTSD symptoms among a large sample of veterans. Her findings are instrumental in further understanding this unique application of animal-assisted intervention for PTSD.”