



Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command
The Royal Canadian Legion

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Dartmouth, Nova Scotia B3B 2Z3

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All Branch Mail Out #58 - 2018

Date: October 15, 2018

To: NS/NU Command Branches
NS/NU Zone Commanders
NS/NU Executive Council
NS/NU Past Presidents
NS/NU Command Staff

From: Valerie Mitchell-Veinotte,
Executive Director/Command Secretary
NS/NU Command, RCL

Subject: A CALL TO ACTION

Message: Comrades: On behalf of NS/NU Command
Veterans Outreach Committee Chairman
Steve Wessel, please see attached
communication for urgent action.



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Comrades All:

Post traumatic stress or operational stress injury is an unending echo etched in the very souls of Veterans affected by it. Rage, anxiety, recurring nightmares, insomnia, depression, isolation and addiction all may be experienced by sufferers. The suicide rate among Veterans is significantly higher due to the intensity of symptoms related to trauma. We are not immune to realizing, or, perhaps from experiencing first- hand how these *devastating* injuries not only affect the Veterans but their spouses, their children, their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and extended families.

Recognizing the urgent, and ever-increasing need of critical support services for Veterans and serving members living with post traumatic stress and operational stress injury, Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command established the standing committee, Veterans Outreach in September 2011.

Fostering and forming mutually supportive partnerships with established community resources, health care professionals, all levels of government and likeminded individuals, the Veterans Outreach Committees' goal is to promote recovery-oriented care and to connect those we serve to vital human resources and social services.

One extremely successful initiative has been through our partnership with Paws Fur Thought. Paws Fur Thought is a volunteer driven initiative that advocates and fundraises to pair PTSD Service Dogs with Veterans in need. Many NS/NU Command Branches are familiar with this work and indeed have supported Veterans and Service Dog pairings through donations from Poppy Trust Funds. NS/NU Command has been working with Paws Fur Thought since its' inception, approximately 7 years ago. We have supported Paws Fur Thought administratively since that time and successfully pressed for the support of Veteran Assist Service Dogs through Poppy Trust Funds. Paws Fur Thought has paired over 115 service dogs with Veterans throughout Canada.

However, the availability of trained dogs is an urgent issue that requires immediate attention as the current wait list for Veterans Assist Service Dogs is at approximately the 2-year mark.

Comrades, although NS/NU Command has been a leader in this endeavour within RCL, it is time we take more than an organizational role if we are to ensure that NS/NU Command Veterans are not left behind.

To date, NS/NU Command has not extended financial support in this initiative.

Over the past 3 years 23 NS Veterans have been paired with Veteran Assist Service Dogs at an average cost of \$15,000.00 Cdn. per pairing.

At the Executive Council Meeting of May 2018, the Veterans Outreach Committee, in conjunction with the Finance Committee, was tasked to investigate potential ways and means by which to accommodate a proposal from Paws Fur Thought to provide the funding to reserve 16 Service Dogs for 16 Nova Scotia/Nunavut Veterans. At its' September meeting NS/NU Command Executive Council voted in favour of extending this financial support. But, Comrades, just as importantly, Executive Council agreed to

heavily increase its' advocacy to have the government of Canada provide this often life saving support to Veterans in need through Veterans Affairs Canada.

Despite having clear affirmation of the benefits to ill and injured Veterans through several comprehensive efficacy studies and research materials, Veterans Affairs Canada still has not moved to provide this as a benefit to Veterans deemed, by the very same department to be disabled as a result of service to this country.

Included in this communication is a letter addressed to you from Paws Fur Thought Co-Founder, Star of Courage recipient Medric Cousineau, a letter from NS/NU Command President Melvin Crowe, the most recent efficacy study on Veteran Assist Service Dogs produced through Laval University. Please follow the link, <https://www.facebook.com/WoundedWarriorsCanada/videos/1810277839026754/> to a video, although produced by Wounded Warriors, featuring 2 Nova Scotia Paws Fur Thought Veterans and their families explaining the effect their service dogs have had on their lives, as well as the Paws Fur Thought website <http://www.pawsfurthought.com/home.html>, which thoroughly lays out the qualification and application process as well as testimonials and reference materials.

Comrades, please, utilize all of this information to educate not only all Branch Members but your greater communities and your local, provincial/territorial and national government representatives. We must press those that represent us to cause this proven vital assistance to our most vulnerable Veterans to be made available to all those in need.

At the call of this country, these once strong warriors, now call themselves "broken."

Veterans suffering these invisible wounds deserve effective treatment.

For far too many, it's too late.

Comrades, we have counted on them. We must ensure that our Veterans know they can count on us with the full strength of every member of Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command of The Royal Canadian Legion.

This, Comrades, is a call to action.

If you require assistance, information or clarification please contact NS/NU Command Executive Director by phone at 902-429-4090 ext. 4, e-mail v.mitchell-veinotte@ns.legion.ca or by post at the address noted above.

I remain, Yours in Comradeship



Steve Wessel
Chairman
Veterans Outreach Committee
Immediate Past President
Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command
The Royal Canadian Legion



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Comrades:

I ask for your support with the initiative being brought forward by the Executive Council of Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command, concerning advocacy for the funding, through Veterans Affairs Canada, of Veteran Assist Service Dogs for those desperately struggling with mental and moral health injuries as a result of their service to this country.

As a Command we have provided administrative and developmental support, since inception, to Paws Fur Thought, a volunteer organization that pairs veterans in need with Veteran Assist Service Dogs.

Due to the ever increasing need and the limited availability of these specially trained Service Dogs, we have now committed financial support to reserve 16 placements for NS/NU Veterans over the next 2 years.

With the results of recent studies showing the tremendous positive impacts these dogs are having on Veterans suffering post traumatic stress we, as Members of Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command, dedicated to serving Veterans, must utilize every opportunity to bring pressure, through our local Members of Parliament, on Veterans Affairs Canada, to move forward in providing this life giving support.

I urge all Members of NS/NU Command to take action by becoming personally involved in this advocacy initiative in support of our most vulnerable Veterans.

Should you require assistance in this effort please contact NS/NU Command Executive Director at the co-ordinates noted above or via email v.mitchell-veinotte@ns.legion.ca.

I Remain, Yours in Comradeship

Mel Crowe
President
Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command
The Royal Canadian Legion

Dear Comrades:

Let me begin by sharing my heartfelt thanks on behalf of myself and all those veterans who have been paired with a service dog to help them deal with the demons of PTSD.

I am taking the liberty of attaching the summary from the VAC efficacy study. A quick summary highlights what we already knew. PTSD Service Dogs save lives and the VAC study highlights this fact. Improved quality of life, improved sleep, improved social functioning and a reduction in the symptoms of comorbid depression are all noted and there is nothing in the PTSD arsenal that rivals these outcomes. For reasons known only unto VAC, the department has repeatedly failed to engage.

Thankfully, the dedicated members of our Command understand and have engaged since the beginning of my journey six and a half years ago. Thai saved my life and reconnected me with my family. She opened the door and became the impetus for Paws Fur Thought and a desire to help others get the kind of help I was given. Had it not been for the Caen Branch and NS/NU Command's unwavering support I would not be here. That support translated into the launch of Paws Fur Thought and again, NS/NU Command answered the call while others stood back and waited.

This faith and action has translated into a service dog initiative that is being copied by other RCL Commands. This is however a very mixed blessing. The supply - demand curve for service dogs is completely out of balance with demand outstripping supply by orders of magnitude. VAC's delay in engaging only serves to exacerbate a known and increasing problem.

Securing a long term supply of quality service dogs that are capable of meeting the needs of the handler is one of the largest challenges Paws and the NS/NU Command will face.

I recently raised a long term funding request to span multi years as what I see as the only viable solution to a complex and urgent problem. If I was to ask the school to increase capacity, it takes 18 months for deliverable results. Thankfully, I made that request 6 months ago. So, in 2019/20 and beyond we hope to continue delivering more service dogs.

However, this does not happen without planning, forethought and funding commitments.

Hopefully this sheds some light on the enhanced funding request.

Yours in Comradeship,

Medric "Cous" Cousineau, SC,CD, KStG
Capt. Retd. RCAF
Co-founder Paws Fur Thought
& Thai the Service Dog

Effectiveness of Psychiatric Service Dogs for Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Participants Report



UNIVERSITÉ
LAVAL



*Results presented in this document origin from the final report of this project to the VAC.
*They are not final and will later be submitted for publication in a scientific journal.

Acknowledgements

We thank everyone who contributed to the study and especially all study participants for their generosity and support.

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Support with participant recruitment

Paws fur Thought

Royal Canadian Legion

Asista

CARES

Citadel Canine

Vancouver Island compassion dogs

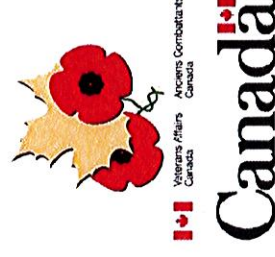
Thames center service dog

National service dogs

Canadian Canine Training

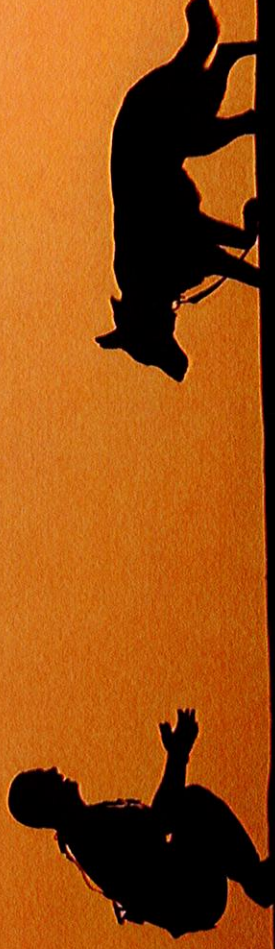
Financial support for this project provided by

Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research (CIMVHR) in collaboration of Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC)



Participants

Since 2016, 31 veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder were recruited to participate in our study. Eighteen of them completed the last follow-up after 12 months with their service dog.



Refer to the Glossary at the end of this document if certain terms are less familiar.

Demographic Characteristics

This section presents the participants' main characteristics.

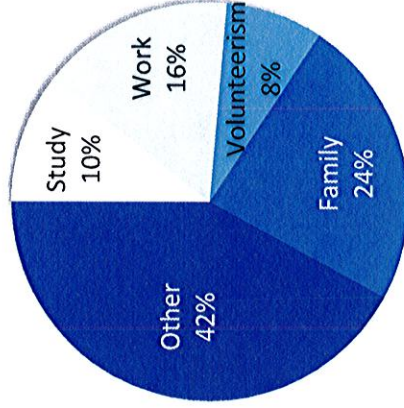
ON AVERAGE, PARTICIPANTS...

Spent **20 years** in the army

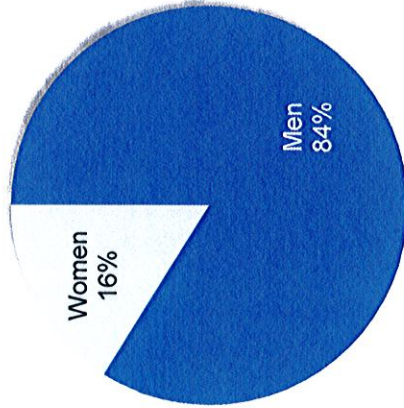
Had been retired for **9 years**

Had been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder for **7 years**

PRINCIPAL OCCUPATION



GENDER

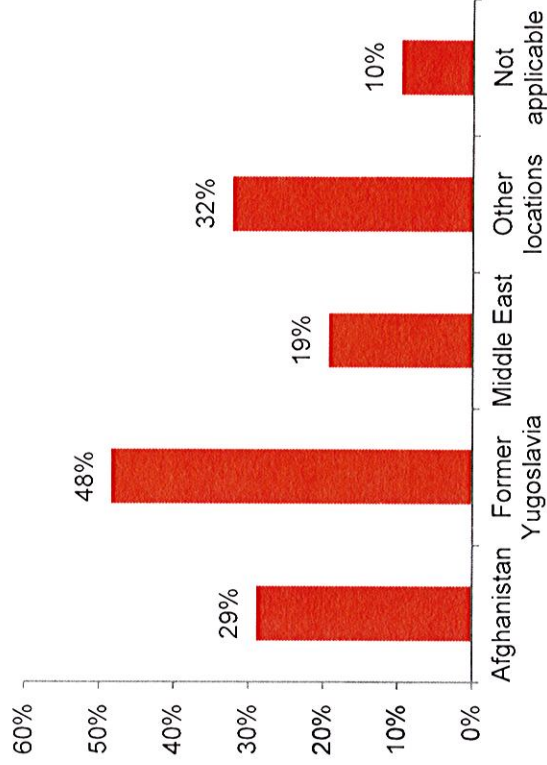


81% Were married or in a relationship

81% Lived in a house

42% Already had another dog

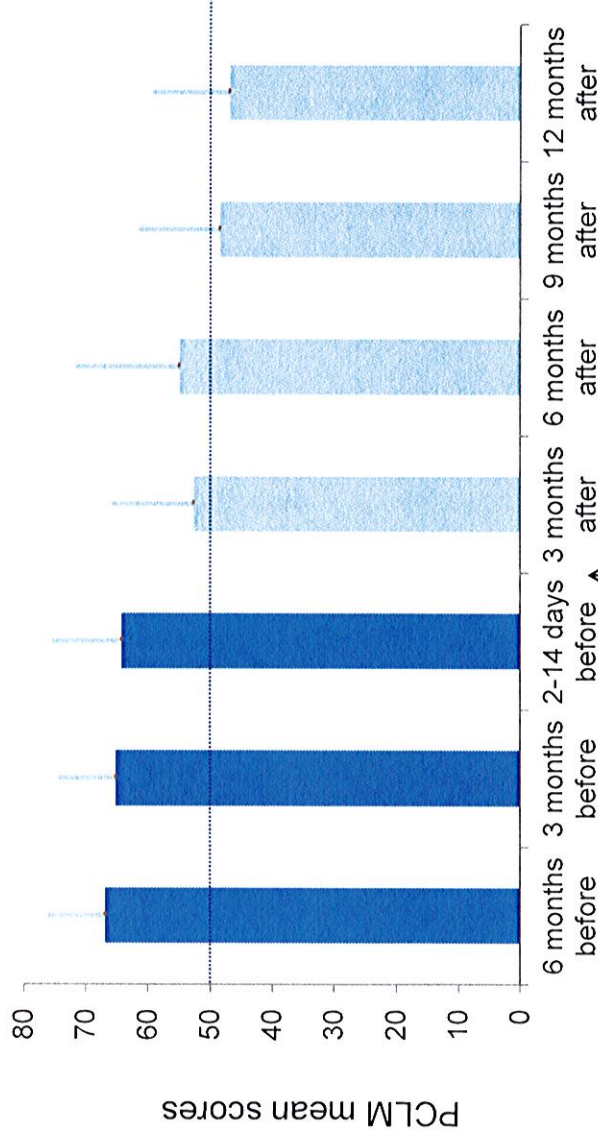
DEPLOYED LOCATIONS



Posttraumatic Symptoms

Posttraumatic symptoms include cognitive intrusions, avoidance, alterations in mood and cognition, and hyper-arousal. Their importance was measured over 18 months, using the **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for military (PCL-M)**.

PCL-M TOTAL SCORES OVER TIME



PCL-M score range: 17 - 85

General decrease in posttraumatic symptoms

Scores on the PCL-M were **significantly lower** after the acquirement of the service dog, indicating that symptoms were reduced. After 12 months, average total scores were **around 50**, which is considered to be a low level of symptoms.

Before acquiring their service dog, participants generally answered that they dealt **“quite a bit”** with each of the 17 items. However, at the end of the study, answers were mostly **between “a little bit” and “moderately”** on this 5-point scale.

Items that were most reduced...

- Feeling distant or cut off from other people
- Being super alert or watchful on guard
- Feeling jumpy or easily startled

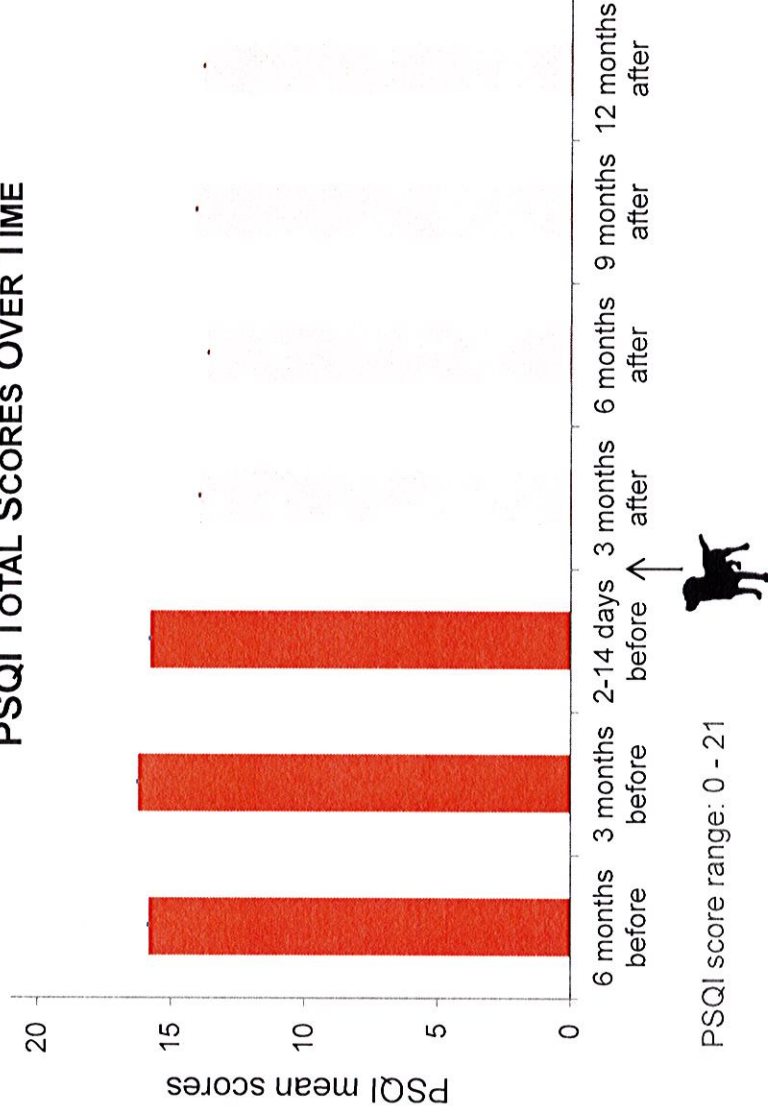
The only item that was not reduced was *Trouble remembering important parts of a stressful military experience*

Sleep Quality

Participants' sleep quality was measured over 18 months, before and after the dog delivery, using the **Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI)**. On this questionnaire, lower scores indicate lesser sleep problems.

Scores on the PSQI were **significantly lower** after the acquirement of the service dog, indicating that participants' sleep quality was generally better.

PSQI TOTAL SCORES OVER TIME



Aspects of sleep that were improved...

- Subjective Sleep Quality
- Sleep Latency
- Sleep duration
- Less nightmares

Aspects of sleep that did not change...

- Sleep efficiency
- Use of sleep medication
- Daytime dysfunction
- Overall sleep disturbances

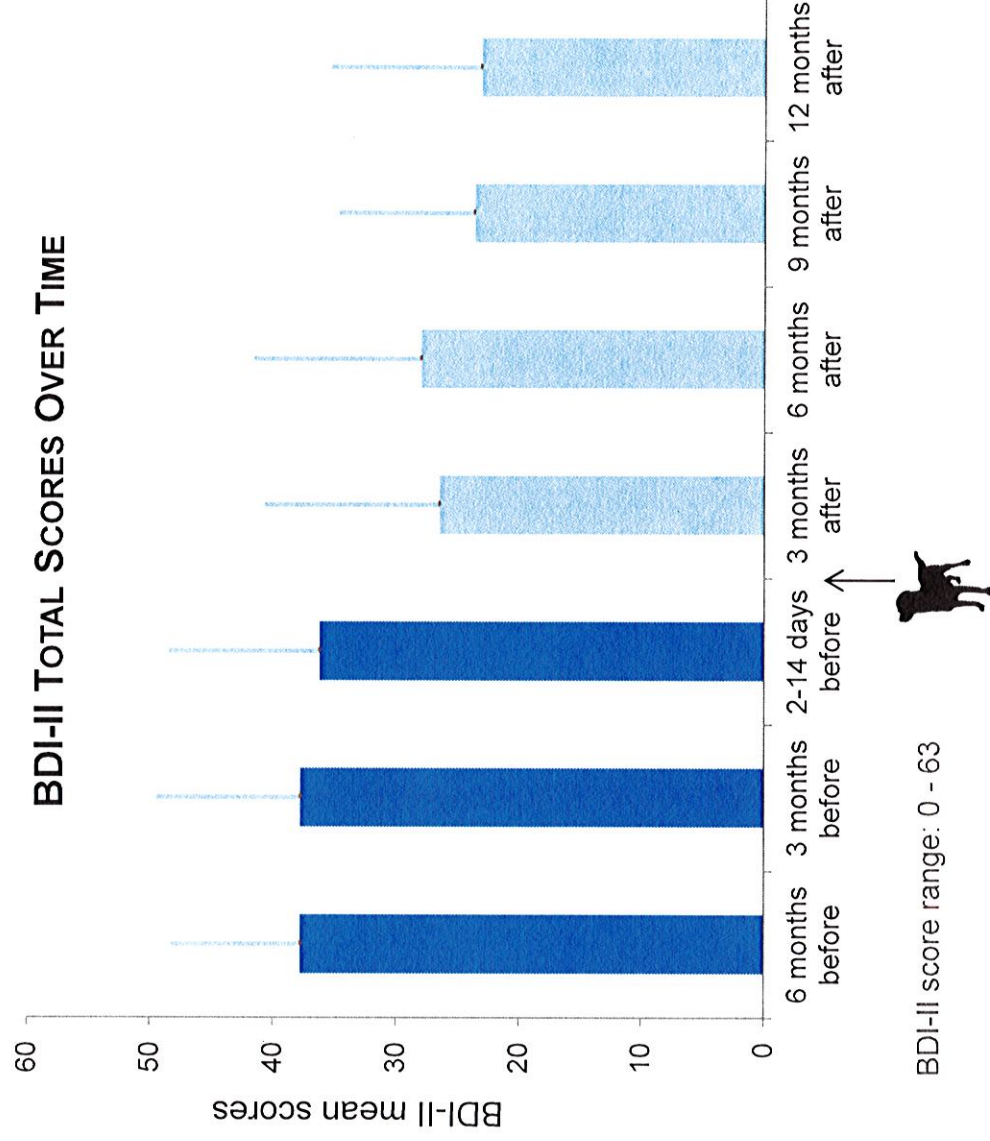
Depressive symptoms

Depressive feelings are often associated with posttraumatic stress disorder. They were measured in this study using the **Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II)**.

General decrease in depressive symptoms

Scores on the BDI-II were **significantly lower** after the acquirement of the service dog, indicating that depressive symptoms were reduced. Depression went from being classified as “severe” (score of 29-63) to “moderate” (20-28).

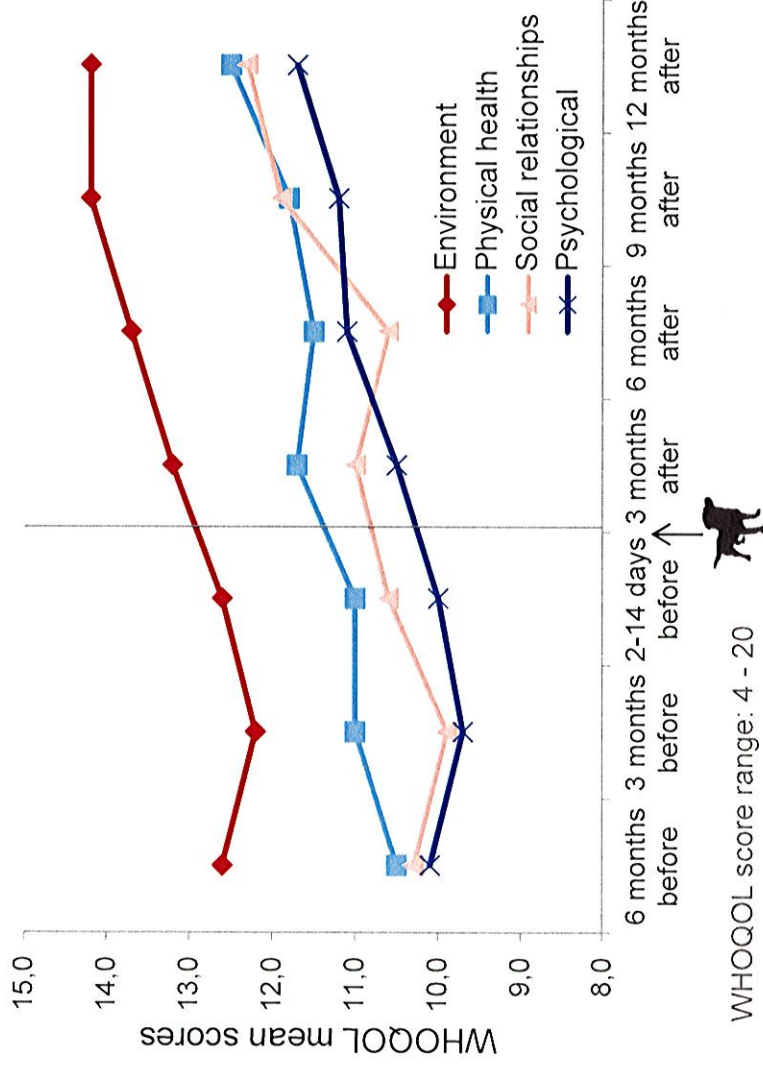
Before the acquirement of the service dog, participants on average selected “2” on a 0 to 3 scale for each of the 21 items. For example, most of them answered “**I am sad all the time**” for the questionnaire’s first item. However, at the last follow-up, “**I feel sad much of the time**” was the average answer, which is worth **1 point** on the BDI-II scale.



Quality of life

Quality of life is determined by a series of statements about the satisfaction that a person feels regarding different aspects of life. It was measured in this study with the **Brief World Health Organization Quality of Life (WHOQOL-BREF)** questionnaire, which contains four domains.

WHOQOL-BREF DOMAIN SCORES OVER TIME



WHOQOL score range: 4 - 20

General increase in quality of life

Total scores on the WHOQOL-BREF were **significantly higher** after the acquisition of the service dog, indicating a greater satisfaction in life.

Environment domain: Scores of the environment domain mainly started to increase after 3 months with the service dog. Participants' **feeling of safety** was especially improved in this domain.

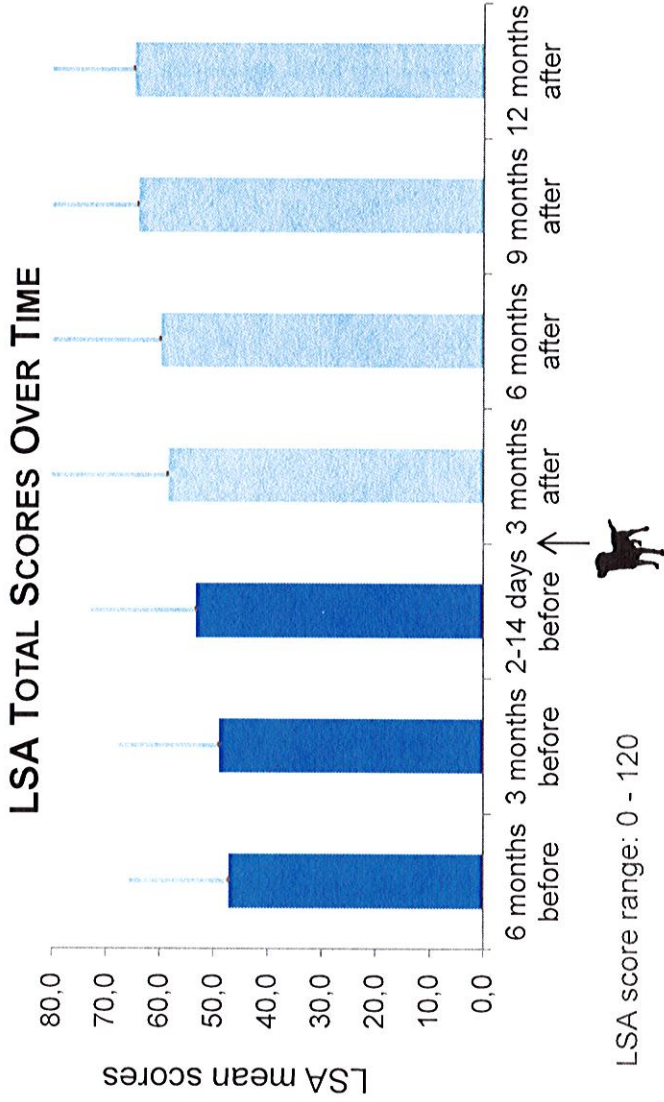
Physical health domain: There was an observable increase in the physical health domain after only 3 months with the service dog. Participants for example reported that their levels of **energy** and **activity of daily living** were higher.

Social relationships domain: The global increase was unclear for the social relationships domain. Scores were significantly higher only after 9 months with the service dog. Nevertheless, when observing individual items, **satisfaction about personal relationships** and **social support** were a lot better. Only the item regarding respondents' **satisfaction about sexual activities** did not change over time.

Psychological domain: After 9 months with the service dog, the psychological domain scores started to increase significantly. Participants especially reported more **positive feelings** and a better **self-esteem**.

Mobility

Participants' mobility level, meaning the extent to which they went outside of their bedroom, was measured over time using the **Life Space Assessment (LSA)**.

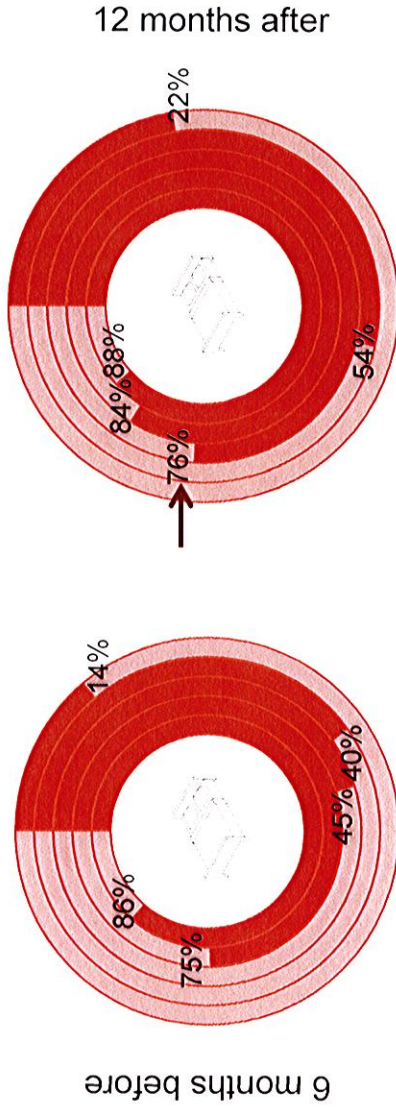


LSA score range: 0 - 120

General increase in mobility

Total scores on the LSA were **significantly higher** after the acquirement of the service dog, indicating that participants went outside more often. Mobility level started to increase from the moment participants engaged in the process of acquiring a dog.

LSA Area Scores Over Time



Increase in the third area

Results indicate that participants went in **their neighbourhood** (area 3) more often with their service dog. Over 18 months, the mean score for this area went from **45%** to **76%** of the maximum. This means that, initially, participants were on average going **1-3 times a week** in their neighbourhood, but this rate increased to **4-6 times** after 12 months with the dog.

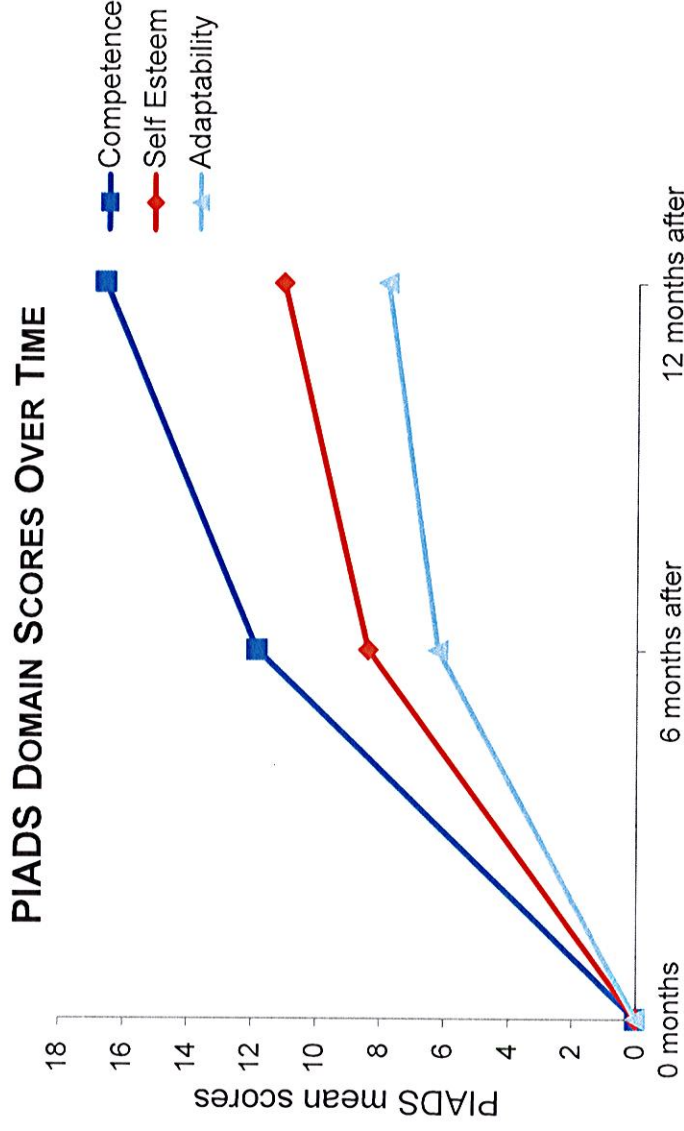
Psychosocial Impact

The psychosocial approach focusses on the combined influence that psychological factors and social environment have on one's ability to function. The psychosocial impact of service dogs was measured twice during the course of this study, using the **Psychosocial Impact of Assistive Device Scale (PIADS)**.

General positive psychosocial impacts

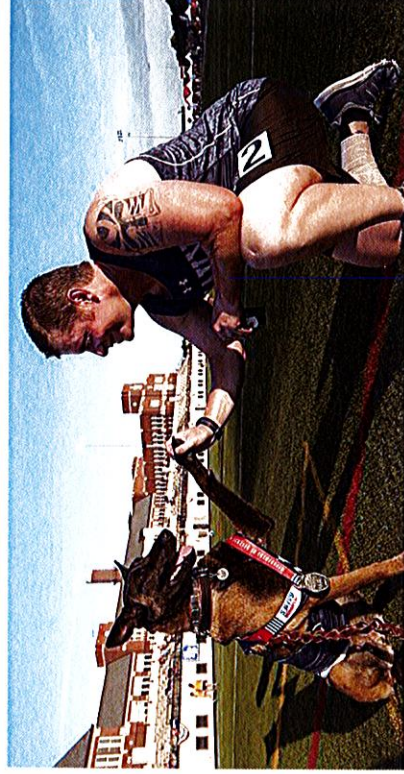
The PIADS scores were **positive for each domain**, indicating that the service dog had a beneficial psychosocial impact on many aspects of life. Competence, self esteem and adaptability were generally improved by the acquirement of the dog. **Scores were even higher at the last follow-up**, which suggests that the effects of service dogs are certainly maintained and sometimes enhanced with time.

After 6 months with their dog, participants on average selected “+1” for every item, on a “-3” to “+3” scale. After 12 months, this mean went up to almost “+2” for each item.



Items that had the highest mean scores after 12 months...

1. *Feeling safe rather than feeling vulnerable or insecure*
2. *Happiness*
3. *Independence*
4. *Quality of life*
5. *Capability*



Caregivers

Nineteen partners of veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder also accepted to participate in this study. We collected their perceptions about the impact of the service dogs in their lives, using the **Caregiver Burden Scale**.

Caregivers' observations about their partners

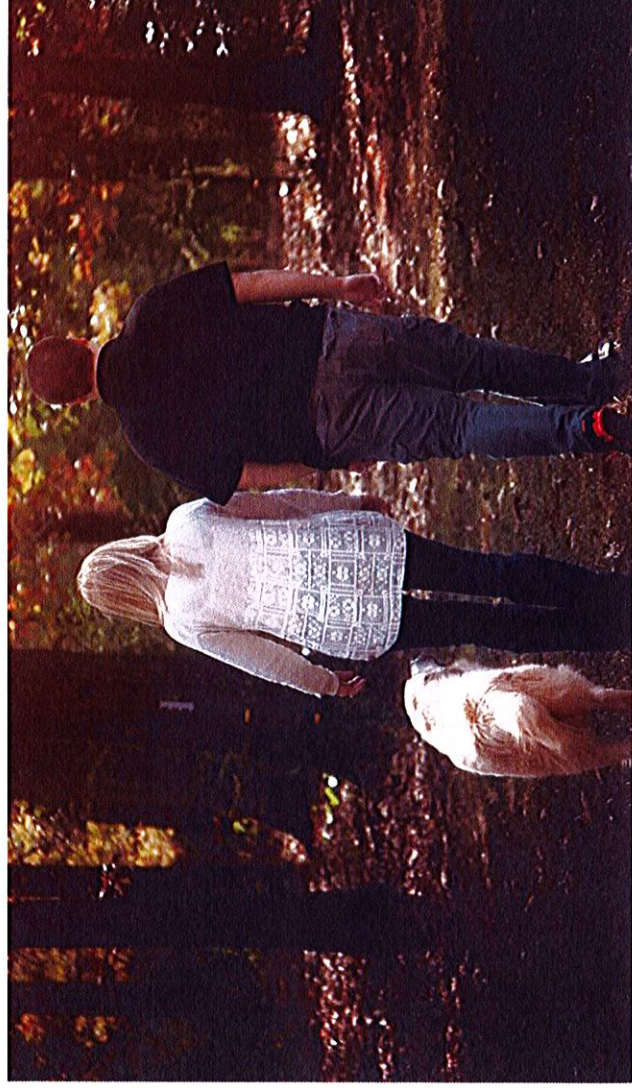
Caregivers' observations confirmed and specified the outcomes regarding the effectiveness of service dogs for veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. Caregivers especially reported an increase in the proportion of veterans that could **go out and run errands alone and without assistance**. This proportion went from 33-53% before the acquirement of the service dog to 100% after 6 months with their dog. It was also observed that **less participants spent more than half of the day in bed or in a chair**. The percentage passed from 47-50% to 14-25%.

Caregivers' burden

No significant change was observed over time in the questionnaire scores regarding caregivers' burden. This suggests that the service dog did not make it significantly easier for the veterans' partners. However, this could be explained by the fact that the burden was already reported as low for some items before the acquirement of the service dog. Also, as shared by one caregiver, further effects may be measured with a longer follow-up:

“Our moving forward in the healing process has slowly just begun.”

“His quality of life has changed drastically and so has ours. Is it a magic wand? No. Is it a cure? No. However our dog is a tool, one of the best tools he has ever been given to cope with his injuries.”



Glossary

Alterations in mood and cognition: Important changes in a person's feelings and ways of thinking. These can occur in several ways, but often present as a neutral or negative mood and a feeling of detachment from other people.

Avoidance: Ways of acting or thinking that demonstrate a desire to avoid unpleasant memories. These can include cases where a person attempts to stop thinking about a traumatic event or to stop doing things that are associated with a traumatic event.

Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II): A 21-item questionnaire that evaluates the importance of depressive feelings. Each item is rated on a scale of 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating more severe depressive symptoms.

Brief World Health Organization Quality of Life (WHOQOL-BREF): A questionnaire to assess a person's satisfaction regarding different aspects of life. It contains 26 questions, yielding altogether four domain scores. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale in which '1' indicates low, negative perceptions and '5' indicates high, positive perceptions.

Cognitive intrusions: Recurring memories of a traumatic event, which occur frequently and cause great distress to the person. It can be repetitive memories, distressing dreams or physiological responses triggered when the person finds him/herself in a situation that reminds him/her of the trauma.

Caregiver Burden Scale: A questionnaire that assesses perceived burden among people caring for others with disabilities. Two of its subscales were selected for the purpose of this study: The Concern for the Care recipient's Well-Being (CCWB) and the Impact on the Caregiver's Social Life (ICSL). Each subscale respectively contains 6 and 17 items.

Hyper-arousal: Alterations in the activation and reactivity of a person. These include symptoms such as anger, difficulty concentrating, memory loss, hyper-vigilance, sleep disturbances and exaggerated startle response.

Glossary

Life Space Assessment (LSA): A questionnaire that collects information about mobility habits in five areas: within the home, around the home, in the neighborhood, in town, and outside of town. Respondents are asked if, over the last four weeks, they attained each of the five levels, at what weekly frequency, and whether assistive devices were used or human assistance was needed. From a total of 20 items, five scores are generated.

Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI): A questionnaire of 21 items that assesses sleep quality and disturbances over one month, generating seven components. Individual items are scored on a 3-point scale.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist for military (PCL-M): A self-report checklist of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms containing 17 items. Respondents indicate the extent to which they have been bothered by a particular symptom over the past month, by rating each item from 1 (“not at all”) to 5 (“extremely”).

Psychosocial Impact of Assistive Device Scale (PIADS): A self-report measure of the impacts of a rehabilitative device (i.e. the service dog) on competence, adaptability, and self-esteem of users. It contains 26 items, each rated on a 7-point scale ranging from -3 (“maximum negative impact”) to +3 (“maximum positive impact”).

Sleep disturbances: General factors that can disrupt a person’s sleep. These include: have to use the bathroom, cough, too cold, too hot, bad dreams, have pain, cannot breathe comfortably, and wake up in middle of the night or early morning.

Sleep efficiency: The number of hours slept divided by the number of hours spent in bed.

Sleep latency: Time spent in bed before a person falls asleep.