



Community Engagement Special Edition

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CENTER FOR COMPASSIONATE
INNOVATION

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Service Dog Edition

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Office of Community Engagement

The Office of Community Engagement (OCE) serves as a trusted resource and a catalyst for the growth of effective partnerships that benefit Veterans and their families.

OCE is a facilitator and an entry point for public and private entities interested in partnering with VHA in the service of Veterans.

Center for Compassionate Innovation

The Center for Compassionate Innovation (CCI)'s mission is to enhance Veterans' health and well-being by exploring emerging therapies that are safe and ethical after traditional treatments have not been successful.

September is National Service Dog Month

Feature **The Many Ways Dogs are Helping Veterans**

Dogs can play many different roles in helping Veterans navigate through their day. Service dogs and emotional support dogs offer different types of support to their human companions. Service dogs undergo years of training to be able to perform specific tasks, whether they are helping to guide a visually impaired Veteran across the street or guiding someone with anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) through a crowded subway platform. Emotional support dogs do not require training. Instead, these dogs offer their human companions emotional comfort. Currently, the VA only allows trained service dogs in its facilities and provides veterinary insurance benefits for dogs trained by Assistance Dogs International - (ADI) and International Guide Dog Federation - (IGDF) accredited programs.

The insurance benefit is currently available for service dogs of Veterans with visual, hearing, or substantial mobility impairments. It covers annual visits for preventative and maintenance care, urgent/emergent care, and prescription medications.

The VA has extended the veterinary insurance benefit for service dogs belonging to Veterans with mental health conditions that cause chronic mobility limitations. The Center for Compassionate Innovation is spearheading this initiative.

There is an ongoing VA study evaluating whether Veterans with PTSD experience improvement in their mental health from having a service dog or an emotional support dog. The results from the study are not yet available.

Emotional support and service dogs may provide a range of benefits to Veterans. It is best to contact your local Mental Health Office or Prosthetics & Sensory Aids Service or discuss your interest in a service or emotional support dog with your treatment team. Please see <https://www.prosthetics.va.gov/serviceandguidedogs.asp> for additional information on VA's role in providing veterinary insurance benefits for service dogs.

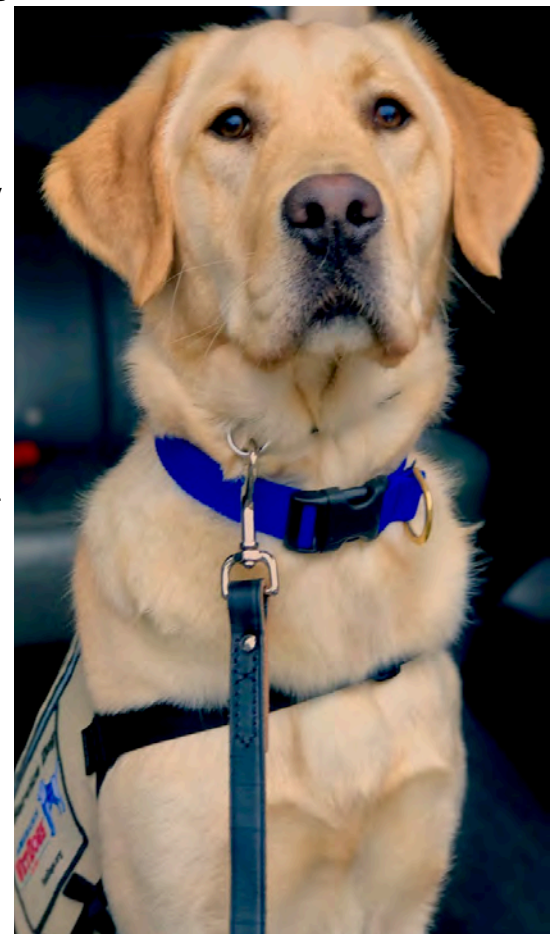


Photo: a service dog

The Center for Compassionate Innovation Expands VA Service Dog Benefit

The Center for Compassionate Innovation (CCI) explores emerging therapies that are safe and ethical after traditional treatments have not been successful. Last year, CCI partnered with Office of Mental Health Services and Prosthetic & Sensory Aids Service to lead VA's efforts to extend the veterinary insurance benefit for service dogs.



Photo: A Veteran and his service dog

Now, Veterans with limited mobility associated with a mental health diagnosis are eligible to receive veterinary insurance benefits for service dogs. Individuals living with a mental health disorder may have difficulty leaving their homes, attending medical appointments, picking up prescriptions, or engaging in activities of daily living. A service dog may alleviate some of the functional limitations that result from significant, ongoing mental health symptoms.

Over the last year, Veterans have begun to receive the veterinary insurance benefit for service dogs, which assist them with their mental health mobility limitations. At the time this article was written, 28 Veterans have been approved for the benefit and another 54 are working with their VA mental health providers and are currently in the process of applying for the benefit.

The Perfect Pair

It can be difficult to leave the house or to run errands that involve interacting with people when you have Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Justin Jirkovsky suffers from the effects of PTSD and fear of public places, reporting, "I feel and am very isolated and my mobility is very limited by both my physical ailments and mental status due to many service-connected injuries and experiences." Justin and his mental health provider felt that a service dog would help him cope with these symptoms and feel more comfortable and secure around other people. Justin believes that, "a service dog will help me with day-to-day issues that I am unable to accomplish."

Mr. Jirkovsky was paired with his service dog, Thor, on May 25, 2017. This was the first pairing achieved through the VA Mental Health Mobility Service Dog Initiative. VA does not provide service dogs. Rather, the Department of Veterans Affairs refers Veterans to accredited service dog organizations. Justin obtained his dog through Smoky Mountain Service Dogs in Loudon, Tennessee. The VA provides the veterinary health insurance benefit to eligible Veterans with service dogs obtained from organizations accredited by either ADI or the IGDF.

Now that Justin and Thor are working side by side, Justin experiences a new sense of confidence in achieving his daily tasks. "Thor is able to wake me up from nightmares, provide [me with] a sense of security by being near me. He is a loyal and trusting companion, as I am to him. My anxiety, depression, and other PTSD symptoms will be lessened in a manner that medicines can't possibly help. I feel very fortunate and thankful that, by receiving Thor, I will benefit in ways that I can't put into words."

There are many ways a Mental Health Mobility Service Dog may help a Veteran. If you are a Veteran who may be eligible for this service dog veterinary insurance benefit, start by contacting your mental health provider to discuss the application process. For more information, please visit: <https://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2809>.

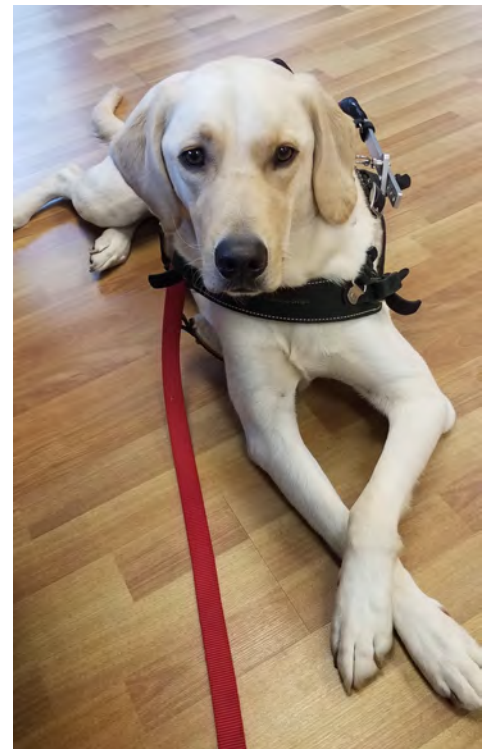


Photo: Thor, service dog

From Puppy to Partner

"He is a lifesaver. He is a reason to get up in the morning and take care of his needs. He is the best thing that ever happened to me after I lost my mom. Without him, I'd never leave the house. I can pet him if I get scared and he calms me down."

-Female Veteran

A small, playful, bundle of fur can grow up to be a well-trained partner, a companion, and a source of calmness and confidence. On a visit to America's VetDogs in Smithtown, New York, members of the VA Center for Compassionate Innovation were able to experience first-hand how puppies are raised and transformed into service dogs.

America's VetDogs is a non-profit service dog organization accredited by ADI. They primarily raise Labradors and Retrievers to work with individuals who need support with mental health mobility. Their training begins when the dogs are puppies, in a special program that includes a collaboration with prison inmates. Inmates are carefully screened and trained in basic handling skills. The inmate handlers selected for the program teach the puppies housebreaking, basic commands, and initial service dog tasks. The puppies also stay with the prisoners in their cell while receiving intensive training from their inmate handler. Weekend volunteers take the puppies to their homes and socialize them to a variety of environments that they may encounter once they are paired with a Veteran. When the dogs are about 14 months old, they return to America's VetDogs for advanced training that is customized to the needs of the Veteran with whom they will be paired.

A Veteran who has been accepted into America's VetDogs will attend a two-week training at the facility. When the Veteran successfully completes the training, the dog and Veteran team return home to continue their partnership.



Photo: Joe and his service dog

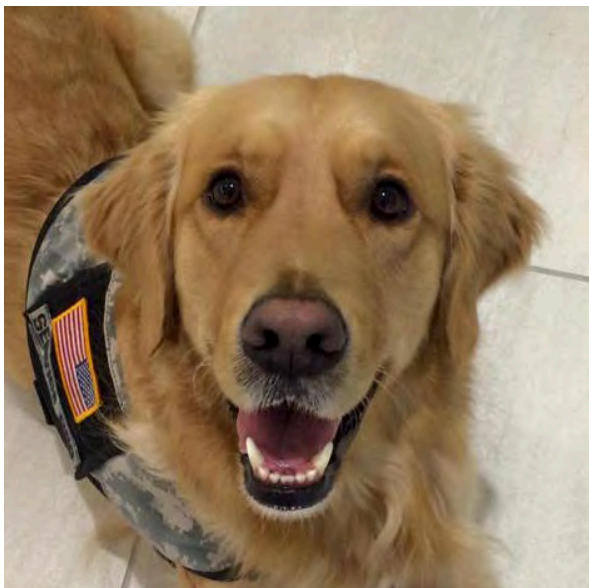


Photo: Levi, service dog

*"My [service] dog is outstanding. She is a stress relief and a big help. **She allows more interaction with my kids.** Before her I could never go to my daughter's practice. She helps me participate in playing catch with the kids. She stays by me everywhere at home and goes with me everywhere I go."*

- Sam, Veteran and VA employee



SERVICE DOG / GUIDE DOG BENEFITS RULES

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is committed to ensuring Veterans receive the benefits for which they qualify. VA implemented rules to codify the previous authorities for guide, hearing and mobility dogs into one regulation, 38 CFR 17.148, titled Service Dogs. VA does not provide service dogs (SD) or guide dogs (GD), but does provide veterinary health care and other benefits in support of guide dogs, and hearing and mobility service dogs to maximize the life and utility of these specialized dogs.

In order to receive benefits, maintain the integrity of the SD/GD program, and ensure Veterans are receiving dogs of the highest level of quality, and training standards, a dog must be received from an Assistance Dogs International (ADI) or International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF) accredited service dog organization. VHA Prosthetic and Sensory Aids Service administers this benefit program for eligible Veterans through a contracted insurance policy, which includes:

COMPREHENSIVE SD/GD

VETERINARY CARE

Veterans with medically approved guide or service dogs are able to access comprehensive veterinary services for their SD/GD including annual visits for preventive care and maintenance care (e.g., immunizations, dental cleanings, screenings, etc.), as well as urgent/emergent care, prescription medications, and care for chronic illnesses and/or disorders when treatment enables the dog to perform its duties in service to the Veteran. Veterans are not billed for covered services, thereby eliminating need for the Veteran to contact VA for pre-authorization or justify covered charges.

This benefit provides Veterans to access preventive, routine and chronic care for their service dogs/guide dogs on a regular basis. Veterans are able to use any veterinarian as coverage is available in all 50 states, District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.



EQUIPMENT

Service dogs/guide dogs may require specialized equipment that has not been supplied by the organization that provided the Veteran's dog. Wear and tear may also result in the need to replace necessary equipment such as harnesses and leash.

TRAVEL SUPPORT FOR TRAINING THE VETERAN AS A HANDLER

A Veteran obtaining a SD/GD from received from an accredited ADI or IGDF service dog organization is

expected to spend time training with the service dog under the supervision of the organization's qualified trainer to learn important skills prior to independently managing the SD/GD.

The time required varies depending on the skill level and complexity of the tasks the dog and the handler must master. Location also varies, and may include time spent at the service dog training organization and time spent in the Veteran's home and community. VA will provide financial support to enable the Veteran to travel to attend training at the ADI/IGDF site.

This benefit will expand Veterans' options by removing travel costs as a limiting factor in locating and selecting an accredited / certified service dog organization tailored to their needs. This benefit is extended through the Beneficiary travel program and only applies when pre-approved.

For more information visit: www.prosthetics.va.gov/Docs/ServiceDogFAQ.pdf

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