



## **VA Program to Provide Service Dogs for Some Veterans with Mental Health Conditions**

**By: Patricia Kime, August 24, 2016**

Veterans with mental disorders that prevent them from leaving their homes or moving around may qualify for a service dog under a new Veterans Affairs program introduced this month.

VA officials said Tuesday that a Service Dog Benefits pilot will cover the veterinary costs of a service dog for a veteran with a mental health condition that limits their mobility.

This would include patients whose medical teams believe their lives would be improved by a dog that can help get them out of bed each morning, go outside, shop or go to social functions.

While VA already covers veterinary care for service dogs that assist blind or deaf veterans and those with mobility restrictions caused by a physical disability, the pilot marks the first time the benefit is being extended to veterans whose primary diagnosis is a mental health disorder, said Dr. Harold Kudler, chief medical consultant for the Veterans Health Administration.

Kudler said many mental health conditions, including anxiety, depression, schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder, can limit a sufferer's mobility.

"A number of disorders can [impair or restrict access], leave you house-bound or restrict your movement to a room of your house or even a chair. These are mobility limitations," Kudler said.

A dog trained in mobility services can provide support and assistance to patients who need it, he added.

Under the pilot, interested veterans will be assessed by their VA medical team to determine whether they would benefit from a service dog, whether they can care for the dog and what goals would be achieved by having a dog.

A consult then would be sent to the VA's national Prosthetics and Sensory Aids office, which would refer the veteran to Assistance Dogs International, an organization that contracts with the VA to manage the pairing and training of a veteran and a dog.

VA will cover the cost of travel to get the dog and veterinary care and equipment such as harnesses or backpacks for the animal. ADI organizations usually provide the dog at no cost to a veteran. The veteran is responsible for the costs of food, over-the-counter medications, grooming, boarding and any other dog-related expenses.

The pilot, created by the new VA Center for Compassionate Innovation, expects to enroll up to 100 veterans from around the country, at an estimated total cost of \$230,000 per year.

Veterans are encouraged to talk to their mental health doctors and treatment teams if they are interested, said Leila Jackson, director of the VHA Center for Compassionate Innovation

"We said 100 veterans will participate because we want to be able learn from the pilot to see if this really will help," Jackson said. "We are sharing information to get the word out so veterans will know about it."

The pilot is separate from an ongoing study at VA on the effectiveness of dogs for treating PTSD. That research, which has paired 67 veterans with service dogs and companion dogs, seeks to determine whether trained service dogs are more effective in helping a veteran manage PTSD symptoms than an "emotional support dog," otherwise known as a pet.

Preliminary findings of that study are expected in 2018.

Kudler said the pilot specifically targets mobility issues related to mental health conditions because by regulation, VA only can cover the veterinary costs of service dogs for visual, hearing or mobility disabilities. Including mobility limitations tied to mental health disorders was the fastest way to extend the service dog benefit to these patients, according to Kudler.

Kudler said that for some patients, like a former World War II prisoner of war he treated early in his career, the pilot could prove to be a great benefit.

"He would go to the grocery store and fill up the shopping cart and then get in line, and at that point, the anxiety built because he was trapped in line," Kudler recalled. "So he would just up and leave the groceries, get in his car and go home. I honestly believe a dog would have been a very big help for that man."

<http://www.militarytimes.com/articles/va-pilot-to-cover-service-dogs-for-mental-health-conditions>