

Service dogs can reduce the severity of PTSD for veterans—new research

June 26 2024, by Sarah Leighton and Kerri Rodriguez



Service dogs are much more than pets. Credit: K9s For Warriors

Service dogs can alleviate some symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder for veterans, according to a [study](#) our team published in June

2024 in the medical journal *JAMA Network Open*.

Over the past decade, [our research group](#) has been studying whether trained service dogs can help veterans with [PTSD](#)—a [mental health condition](#) that some people develop after experiencing a traumatic event.

Building off our preliminary findings, we conducted the [first and largest clinical trial of its kind](#) to assess this complementary intervention.

We recruited 156 post-9/11 veterans from the waitlist of [K9s For Warriors](#), a nonprofit that matches trained service dogs with veterans who have PTSD. Of that total, 81 received service dogs and 75 remained on the waitlist throughout the three-month study. Most had been deployed and had served in the Army, three-quarters identified as male, and the average age was 38 years old.

All veterans initially completed online surveys about their well-being and were interviewed about their PTSD symptoms by expert clinicians. We followed up three months after they either got a service dog or remained on the waitlist.

Those with service dogs had less severe symptoms and better quality of life. For example, they had milder depression and anxiety and better moods. They also had significantly lower odds of still meeting the [diagnostic criteria for PTSD](#).

These results provide the most definitive evidence to date that service dogs are more than just pets. Our findings suggest that partnerships with these trained animals can yield lifesaving benefits for current and former service members.

Why it matters

With [more than 17 U.S. military veterans dying by suicide](#) daily, their [mental health](#) is a pressing concern. Up to 29% of post-9/11 veterans have been [diagnosed with PTSD at some point](#). [Some treatments for PTSD](#) are available, such as exposure therapy and medications. But barriers to care, stigma, and [high dropout](#) rates from [treatment programs](#) [limit their effectiveness](#); thus, there is a push to identify additional treatment options.

For example, there has been recent research on the [use of the drug MDMA](#), combined with psychotherapy, for PTSD. However, an [Food and Drug Administration advisory panel voted in June 2024 against approving](#) the drug's use as a PTSD treatment due to concerns about safety and the potential for abuse.

Service dogs are trained in [specific tasks](#) to help with a disability. For veterans with PTSD, a dog's role could include interrupting a [panic attack](#) or laying across veterans' laps to calm them. People with disabilities have a [legal right to be accompanied by their service dogs](#) in public, whether they're at a supermarket or a baseball game.

Our findings can inform policymakers, health clinicians and [insurance companies](#) on the value of service dogs for veterans with PTSD, potentially increasing funding for groups that train and place service dogs and shortening wait times.

What's next

We're conducting a [randomized clinical trial](#) called the Service Dog and Veteran Experiences Study, or SERVES. It's being done in collaboration with K9s For Warriors and [Canine Companions](#), another nonprofit that [trains](#) and provides [service dogs](#) to veterans.

In this next study, we will have a randomized group of veterans receive a

service dog early or remain on the waitlist as a control. We will follow those veterans for 12 months—rather than just three months—after they receive a service dog or not.

The SERVES study, in turn, will be followed by another [randomized clinical trial](#) funded by the Defense Department. It will investigate whether [service dog partnerships can enhance the effectiveness of prolonged exposure therapy](#), an existing gold standard treatment for PTSD.

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