



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON

VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Republicans | Ranking Member Phil Roe, M.D.

H.R. 4305: The Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) for Veterans Therapy Act

Background:

Despite significant increases to funding, staffing, programs, and attention for suicide prevention and mental health among those who have served since the late 1990's, approximately 20 of our nation's veterans, active-duty servicemembers, and never Federally activated members of the National Guard and Reserve die by suicide every day and between 11 and 30 percent of veterans have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To care for those suffering from invisible wounds of war, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must have the ability to provide both traditional mental health treatments and promising innovative approaches like service dog training therapy.

Research conducted by Kaiser Permanente and Purdue University has found that working with service dogs helped alleviate the symptoms of PTSD, leading to better interpersonal relationships, a lower risk of substance abuse, and overall better mental and physical health. This research is consistent with the experiences of servicemembers and veterans who have gone through service dog training therapy programs at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and the Palo Alto VA Medical Center and reported improved mental health and a reduction in their PTSD symptoms as a result. The PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act would expand on those programs by providing grants to organizations that provide service dog training therapy to veterans in need. Veterans participating in the program would work with qualified service dog training instructors and taught to train service dogs for veterans with disabilities. Upon completion of the program, if the veteran and the veteran's provider agree that it is in the veteran's best interest, the veteran would be able to adopt their dog to provide continuing support or it would be paired with another veteran.

The Message:

- Mental health does not have a one-size-fits-all solution, which is why VA must provide innovative and out-of-the-box treatments to help veterans thrive.
- Service dog training therapy has a positive effect on veterans' physical and emotional health by giving them new coping and job training skills as well as a sense of responsibility, purpose, and hope.
- The PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act would expand existing pilot programs to help veterans heal through service dog training therapy.
- There's no denying the emotional and psychological benefits dogs have on humans, but, for veterans struggling with mental health challenges, those benefits could prove life-saving.